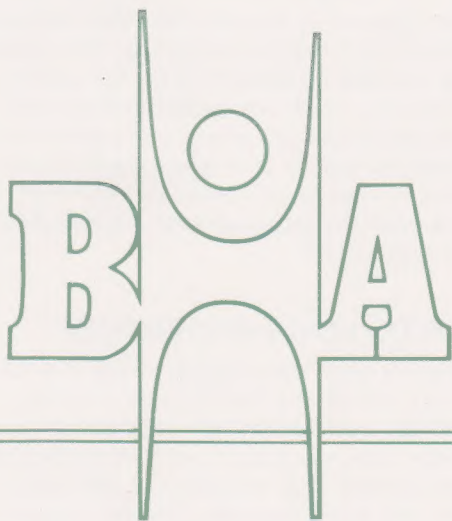


HUMANISTS **... a quick** **sketch**



BRITISH HUMANIST ASSOCIATION

Registered Charity 235987

13 Prince of Wales Terrace, London W8 5PG

01-937 2341



HUMANISTS ... a quick sketch

WHAT DO HUMANISTS BELIEVE?

Humanists accept responsibility for their own lives, since we do not believe in "God". We prefer the scientific explanation for why we are here: namely evolution. We feel that the balance of evidence and reason is against there being any supernatural force in the world. To say "God created everything" gets one nowhere: it merely poses the further question "who created God?"

Humanists recognise that human beings are more advanced than other living things. They have an ability to understand, a sensitivity, and a sense of responsibility, that other animals do not possess. For this reason (and because we think there is no God) we assume that the future of humankind, and of all the natural world, is in the hands of men and women. Acceptance of this responsibility is the basis of Humanism.

Humanists believe that, when a person dies, that is that. The human body is a wonderful machine. When it ceases to function, the person is clinically dead and there can be no further life. This seems the most plausible explanation to us. We cannot help thinking that people who believe in an "afterlife" are giving way to wishful thinking. For some it is clearly a comfort to believe in a reunion with family and friends in some future existence. What matters to Humanists is the "here and now" – for ourselves and future generations.



HOW DO HUMANISTS BEHAVE?

Humanists differ from religious people in a number of ways. We observe that our understanding of the world has grown remarkably with the advance of science. Two thousand years ago, when the Greeks heard thunder, they thought that the Gods were angry; we now know that thunder is caused by electricity. Science is a continuing process of discovery and surprise, though none can claim to have the final answers. Humanists rely on the knowledge and wisdom that human beings have themselves built up. We expect no help from "God" nor any reward in "Heaven".

Humanists recognise that belief in God can be a strength and help to many people; and we have no wish to threaten or distress them by undermining this support. However, in return, we expect fair play. We profoundly object to schools teaching children about religion as if it were established fact. We expect the same critical methods to be used in studying religion as are considered necessary in the study of science or history.

Humanists are deeply concerned about right and wrong. We do not believe that morality comes from "God", but from within ourselves. It is to do with people and how they should treat one another; it is about unselfishness and kindness and consideration towards others. The need for a moral code arises in any society if people are to live together in harmony. The human basis of morality has in the past been clouded by religious teaching and prejudice. Only recently, as belief in "God" declines, is it emerging clearly as an acceptable explanation.

Humanists have two particular responsibilities here:

- We must share with others our view that the highest human values and ideals come from people and not from "God".
- We must seek to influence society for the best along the lines that we ourselves have worked out.



WHAT DO HUMANISTS DO?

Humanists try to be hopeful and practical: we have to. After all, we take it upon ourselves to make life as fulfilling and pleasant for everyone as we can. We think ahead to how best we can conserve the earth's resources for our children and our children's children. We seek to achieve these aims by living considerately and unselfishly, and by cooperating with other people, many of whom have a religious basis to their beliefs.

Such cooperation is not always possible, however. On some issues Humanists are pressing for a more rational and humane approach: we are seeking to bring to an end the harmful results of certain religious attitudes. Examples of these are:

- The campaign to make abortion available when it is necessary, with the woman rather than the doctor having the final choice;



- Legislation on voluntary euthanasia for adults (or the right to die with dignity when one chooses);
- Greater tolerance towards minority groups such as homosexuals;
- The battle to get contraception available to all. (The Catholic church in particular has caused untold suffering throughout the world by its opposition to birth control.)
- The determination to value women as highly as men.

Humanists provide ceremonies with no religious content for funerals and other occasions. The Humanist Housing Association runs a number of sheltered housing schemes in South East England. The Independent Adoption Society was founded by Humanists to enable parents with no religious convictions to adopt children.

Humanists seek a fairer representation of Humanist views on the media and in the press. There is a long way to go here, as success depends to a large extent on more people "standing up and being counted" as Humanists. Notable advances are being achieved in education. An increasing number of schools include Humanism, as well as religious life stances, in their programmes of personal, moral or religious education.

The British Humanist Association is the national voice of Humanism and it welcomes the support of all Humanists. There is also a network of local Humanist groups, where members can meet fellow-Humanists more frequently and, at the same time, help to provide a local base where Humanist ideas can be heard and local campaigns fought. Organised Humanism is most important, if our ideas and attitudes are to gain wider recognition and influence.

